

From Death to Life in Christ

4th Sun. in Lent – 03/10/21 – Mt. Calvary Luth.
Text: Ephesians 2:1-10 Pastor Keith Besel

vv. 4-5 **“But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved –”.**

Introduction

✘ I love riding on rollercoasters! How about you? And if at all possible, I doubly love riding in the very first car on a rollercoaster. You know why? because of the thrill you get when you peak at the highest point of the ride, and the bottom drops out from under you, and you then look straight down at what seems like you are falling to your death.

→ We'll come back to this rollercoaster story in bit. Until then let's talk about the ride that St. Paul takes us all on in our Epistle Reading today in Ephesians 2:1-10. It is a death-defying ride with implications so much more important than any we might find at an amusement park.

→ The ride Paul takes us on has eternal consequences – literally! If something doesn't change the truth of our situation after Paul points out the drop we all were in because of our original state and our earthly work, then it truly ends for us in the deadly depths of eternal torture in hell.

I. Walking in Death

✘ That's the starting point of this second chapter of Paul's letter to the Ephesians – on a death spiral, remembering our original state as human beings, born in a sin-filled world. Paul begins with these cheery words in verses 1-2, “And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked...”.

→ What a nice way to start out a conversation right? Talk about the bottom dropping out, it's as if Paul has us looking down over the edge at a bottomless pit that is our past, saying to us all, “Never forget friends, that once “you were dead”, as if you had dropped from all the way up here with no net onto a pile of jagged rocks or into a pool of molten lava”.

→ And why were you dead? because of who you were in your original state, a person immersed and saturated in “trespasses and sins”. Paul says that's how you “once walked”, meaning that's the way that you lived and breathed and acted in this world.

✘ He even identifies the three corrupt and deadly influences and entities that carried and kept us in this deadly way of life.

→ In verse two, the first is the fallen world. Paul says we “walked, following the course of this world”. Ever since Adam and Eve bit into the forbidden fruit, all of God's Creation groaned at the beginning and continuation of destruction and death. And when a fallen world is filled with sin-fallen people, the pressures of this world to tempt and drag you and me down into an ever deeper corruption of the soul is like sin-powered gravity that is impossible to resist.

→ Not only were we following the world, but Paul says we also were “following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience...” (v.2). The “air” is the lowest of the levels in the atmosphere; the part that meets up with the earth; the part that you and I all breathe in and out every day. And the “prince” of this realm is none other than Satan himself. He is the one that 1 Peter 5:8 warns us about, calling him our “adversary”, who “prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour”. Revelation 12:9 calls him the

“great dragon” and “the deceiver of the whole world”. As we were following him we could have only be heading toward death and condemnation.

→ And the third deadly influence that Paul identifies in verse three is when he sticks a mirror before our face and includes you and me in with the “sons of disobedience”, saying, “among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind”. Yes, we were our own worst enemies because of our carnal passions that mindlessly followed and believed and placed our trust in whatever feels good; whatever sounds like it is the most fun; whatever we selfishly thought might make us fit in or gain power and influence and an advantage over someone else; whatever the world and the lies of the devil tricked us into thinking is better and more important than the Word and ways of God.

- ✘ Well, this is quite the cheery ride so far isn't it? Still, we're not quite at the bottom yet. Paul says that this deadly drop has the most ominous of endings, “we were by nature children of wrath” (v.3). That's right, walking on the course of this world and following the lies of the devil and the mindless corruption of our carnal desires means a life totally separated from God and under the fire of His wrath because we have then rejected Him as our loving Creator; we have refused His ways of truth and life which He has given to us in His Word for our good. Revelation 3:15-16 clearly says there are only two options and one of them is not riding the fence between being hot or cold in our belief. The Lord says, “I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot. ... So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth”.
- ✘ Here's how Martin Luther described this death spiral, “In worldly and external affairs; which pertain to the livelihood and maintenance of the body, man is cunning, intelligent, and quite active; but in spiritual and divine things, which pertain to the salvation of the soul, man is like a pillar of salt, like Lot's wife, indeed, like a log and a stone, like a lifeless statue, which uses neither eyes nor mouth, neither sense nor heart. For man neither sees nor perceives the terrible and fierce wrath of God on account of sin and death...but ever continues in his security, even knowingly and willingly, and thereby falls into a thousand dangers, and finally into eternal death and damnation; and no prayers, no supplications, no admonitions, indeed, also no threats, no chiding, are of any avail, indeed, all teaching and preaching is lost upon him, until he is enlightened, converted, and regenerated by the Holy Spirit” (FC SD II 20-21).

II. God's Work of Life

- ✘ Let's return for a moment to our rollercoaster ride I was describing at the beginning. As you drop down that vertical hill in the front car of the coaster, you feel your body come up off of the seat as if you're falling out of the restraints. Your face is looking directly at the ground below. The fall is slow at first, but as each car behind you goes over the top, your speed increases until the weight of the entire train of cars is pressing you, hurtling you down toward destruction.
 - But then, just when you think you're surely dead, the wheels of your car connect once again to the track, and you are pulled, straining against enormous g-forces from both your own body and that of the train, up and away from that final deadly crash to find that you are alive! You didn't die. In fact, the ride goes on lifting you up and away to new thrills through the twists and turns of an energetic ride called life!
- ✘ The same big moment occurs in Paul's text before us today in verse four with on small, but mighty three-letter word – “But”. In fact, the message that this word ushers in is the pivotal point, not only of this small text here today, but in all of Scripture; in our entire lives!
 - This “but” introduces God and His work from eternity. It shows us His nature; how He is rich in mercy, and great in love ... for us! “But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which He loved us...”, Paul says.

- ✘ What a great set up. For each one of the three evil influences that led us in a deadly plunge away from God, Paul answers with three life-saving and life-recreating works of grace from God that bring us back into His eternal arms.
- ✘ The first is in verse five, "...even when we were dead in our trespasses, [God] made us alive together with Christ – by grace you have been saved".
 - ➔ Can you believe it folks? ... I mean, look in the mirror of how we just finished describing your natural state and work. We were dead! What good is a dead person? We were full of sin – committed to the world and Satan and our fleshly passions. Why would anyone love us? Especially the almighty Creator and God – the One whom we have wronged every day of our lives!
 - ➔ "But..." God's loving, creative work showed up again and created life out of nothing once more, just as He did at the beginning of creation. Paul says He "made us alive together with Christ". He did it, not us; not the world; not the devil or any other power. This is all God at work!
 - ➔ Paul says, "by grace...", that is God's exclusive, undeserved love for us sinners who actually deserved His condemning wrath. "By grace...you have been saved". To be saved means that we have been rescued. It means without Him, we'd be dead forever! "But" He has saved us from hell, torture and condemnation. Oh, too often; too quickly; too flippantly we say those words, like "Jesus saved me" or "I am saved".
 - ➔ But friends, don't ever forget; don't ever take for granted what that means for you ... to be "saved"!
- ✘ The second of God's works is at the beginning of verse six, "...and [God] raised us up with Him...", that is Christ. This, of course, is resurrection talk. But remember it is in the past tense because even now – before we leave this earth – our resurrection from death (i.e. the death of sin) has already been won. Christ won it in His death and payment for us on the cross and in His resurrection on Easter to overcome the power of death, because death had no power over Him as the very Creator of life!
 - ➔ So, yes, Paul is clear in Romans 6:4 our resurrection has already been given to us and accounted to us as a certainty in our baptism. He said in the past tense again, "We were buried therefore with Him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life".
- ✘ And God's third death-defying work in the second part of verse six is this, "[God] seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus". Amazingly, this too is in the past tense. It is a done deal; what theologians call a "future fact" because it is in no way depends upon us to come about. No, Paul says it is "in Christ Jesus".
 - ➔ So yes, right now in the year 2021 you have a place in heaven with Jesus. Paul told us in Philippians 3:20 that "our citizenship is in heaven", present tense. In Christ, your eternal life and mine, has already begun.
- ✘ But wait, as utterly amazing and jaw-dropping as this is for us today, verse seven tells us that there is so much more still ahead of us that Paul is not able to describe or tell us here in this text, but "in the coming ages He", that is God who has seated us with Himself in heaven will then "show the immeasurable riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus". Wow! How could He have even more kindness to show us? I can't wait to find out.
- ✘ Then for the rest of Paul's text, (i.e. in the famous verses) verses 8-9 and verse 10, Paul stresses again that this life-saving and life-giving work of God is 0% you and me at work and 100% God at work in His love for us sinners!

- His grace; His gift of faith – they are not your doing! It is all gift!
- ⊗ But we see in verse nine that Paul knows us well – how much we just can't stop thinking that we had to do something, some little dinky bit in our salvation. We at least had to make a small decision, or at least had to say, “no” to sin, or at least had to ask Jesus into our hearts, right?
 - No, no, and no! There is not one tiny grain of sand for us to boast about in having a part in our salvation. We couldn't do anything because we were dead!

Conclusion

- ⊗ You know, it's not uncommon to hear a child who's just beginning to speak utter the words, “I love you”. But the Bible says in 1 John 3:16 that love is an action, “By this we know love, that [Jesus] laid down His life for us”. That is love that you can measure.
 - But a child's love? What does a child do for his/her parents? At the age we're talking about, chances are children have done almost nothing in terms of actions. The child cannot change his own diaper; she cannot fix a meal for her parents. The child cannot go and get the groceries. The child can do nothing!
 - Yet the child loves the parent. Why? because the parent first loved the child. The parent has done loving actions for the child; changing the diapers, fixing those meals, etc. A parent's love for the child creates a trust in the child. In time, it will create loving actions of respect and obedience.
- ⊗ This is how it works between us and God. We have nothing to offer Him, and yet His love for us – especially the action of Jesus laying down His life for us – creates in us a faith toward Him and a love for others that springs from a grateful heart.
 - So, Paul concludes assuring us that the end result of God's saving heroism in pulling us up out of the death spiral is that we now get to enjoy the rest of the train ride of life, living 100% as God's “workmanship”; as His re-creation from death to life; doing His godly work mapped out for us before we were even alive.
- ⊗ Oh how I love riding rollercoasters, especially when I arrive at the end and I jump out of the car and get to talk about the ride with the others who were in it with me, and even with those who were not. That's where you and I are at now in our faith, with Paul in verse 10. We've been saved by grace!
 - Now we get to laugh about and celebrate the ride. Now we get serve God in the joy of His rescue. Now we get to tell others how wonderful our God is and how powerfully He has saved them as well. Amen.